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A PEEP

AT

BARTHOLOMEW FAIR;

CONTAINING

AN INTERESTING ACCOUNT

OF THE

AMUSEMENTS AND DIVERSIONS

OF THAT FAMOUS

METROPOLITAN CARNIVAL.

With Anecdotes

OF

FLOCKTON, JEFFERY DUNSTAN,

AND OTHER

CELEBRATED CHARACTERS.

"MIRTH, ADMIT ME OF THY CREW."

London:

R. MACDONALD, 30, GREAT SUTTON STREET,

CLERKENWELL.

A PEEP

AT

BARTHOLOMEW FAIR.

Who has not heard of Bartholomew Fair, the "Cockney's Carnival," as an old Lumber Trooper used to designate it? The following pages are intended to afford the reader a popular and interesting account of this celebrated Metropolitan Carnival.

This fair owes its origin to a charter granted to the Monks of the Priory of St. Bartholomew. The Prior's name was Rahere, after whom a new street in Clerkenwell has recently been named. The fair was chiefly designed for the sale of cloth, and there still remains a street of ancient date, leading out of West Smithfield, called Cloth Fair.

To afford sufficient space for the business transacted at this fair, Smithfield was selected as the place best calculated for the purpose. It was there that tilts and tournaments were exhibited, and the gallant knights with their golden spurs rode majestically into the arena appropriated to

the chivalrous conflict. Hence arose the name of Giltspur Street, which is given to the short street facing the Old Bailey.

The antiquity of Bartholomew Fair is very great. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth it had acquired such celebrity that Ben Jonson wrote a dramatic piece on the subject, full of wit and humour.

Intimately connected with this fair are various privileges and immunities granted to the corporation of the City of London. It was directed that the fair should be solemnly proclaimed by the Lord Mayor in state, attended by the Sheriffs, on the Feast of St. Bartholomew, August 24; but upon the alteration of the style, the proclamation day was altered to the 3d of September.

The duration of the fair was originally more than six weeks; it was subsequently abridged to three weeks, and finally to three days, exclusive of the day of proclamation, the period for which it is now held.

Although Bartholomew Fair was originally established for commercial purposes, that feature has long been obliterated; and it has for more than a century been distinguished merely for shows and interludes, and for noise, mirth, and a grotesque display of low fun and vulgar humour.

It is the prerogative of the Lord Mayor to allow or to prohibit public exhibitions during the fair; but very few chief magistrates have precluded the usual public amusements; and when such has been the case, the most disastrous consequences have followed.

Of late years only two Lord Mayors have prohibited shows, namely, Bull and Sawbridge.

Alderman Bull was a dissenter, of the Baptist persuasion, and belonged to the congregation of the late Reverend Abraham Booth. Sawbridge, who was an avowed Republican, was brother to the female historian, Mrs. Macaulay, author of a History of England, written in a spirit of bitter asperity against the unfortunate family of the Stuarts. Fearful consequences resulted from the indiscreet conduct of Bull and Sawbridge in the prohibition of shows. The windows of every house in Smithfield were broken; the scaffolds and stalls were destroyed, and the whole of the timber consigned to the flames by the infuriated mob. Subsequent Lord Mayors have wisely complied with the wishes of "the many-headed throng," and peace and tranquillity have been the consequence.

At twelve o'clock on the night of the 2d of September, agreeably to ancient custom, the fair is proclaimed by what is denominated *Lady Holland's Mob*. This, in fact, is merely a public announcement of the commencement of the fair, by the Lord or Lady of the Manor; but the ceremony is always attended by an uproarious mob, who very unceremoniously arouse the worthy inhabitants of Smithfield from their nocturnal slumbers, by violently knocking and ringing at every door, in a manner which would frighten even Monsieur Tonson to death.

In the area of Smithfield, amidst the sheep-pens in the middle of that spacious place, tables are set out with appropriate embellishments, truly inviting to the hungry passenger, on the side of which are prime sausages, to which the famed sausages of Epping must not enter into competi-

tion. These delightful gastronomic retreats used formerly to be designated Wilkes's Parlour. Whence this name originated, we know not; we are persuaded, however, that it was not from the famous author of *The North Briton* having sat down in one of them to enjoy its luxuries. Round-abouts, and those vehicles of amusement generally known by the name of Ups and Downs, were also placed in the above arena, but have lately been removed out of Smithfield. To those who have not seen these gratifying and money-getting sources of amusement, the following description of them may be acceptable.

The Round-abouts consist of a number of wooden horses prettily ornamented, which are ridden by the youth of both sexes, and are made to go round at a rapid rate, amidst the joyous shouts of the juvenile riders.

The Ups and Downs are of a different description, and in many respects dangerous, from the great height to which they have been raised. It is not many years since a fine girl was precipitated from one of these vehicles, and killed on the spot

The numerous stalls on the foot-path around Smithfield form no unpleasing spectacle, some of them being fitted up in a very gorgeous manner. These stalls contain articles of every description, toys, haberdashery wares,

> Ribbons and laces,
> With many pretty faces,

gingerbread husbands and wives, almond cakes and game nuts, dolls and horses, drums and rattles, &c. &c.

Many years since a set of scoundrels, chiefly journeymen bakers, used to congregate together, and, in riotous confusion, often overthrew stalls, to the great injury of the property of the owners of them; but now, owing to the establishment of the New Police, the greatest order is preserved. The inhabitants of Smithfield benefit by the placing of these stalls before their doors, having a stipulated sum granted for the privilege; and a few let out their shops, or some appurtenances thereto, for exhibition.

In the years 1782 and 1783 a very fine exhibition of stuffed birds and beasts was opened to view by Mr. Hall, of the City Road. In the latter year the ingenious proprietor experienced an unfortunate accident. Some young men, heated with potent libations of the juice of the Tuscan grape, upon entering the museum, forcibly dragged a fine stuffed zebra out of the house, and dragged it all round Smithfield. For this outrageous conduct the offenders were ultimately obliged to make ample compensation to Mr. Hall for the injury he had sustained.

We shall now notice some of the prominent characters who have figured at Bartholomew Fair. The noted Flockton was the prince of puppet-show men. His Fantoccini was singularly good; the itinerant Punch and Judy of the present day are nothing to compare to it. Flockton was also an eminent sleight-of-hand performer; he was nearly equal to Breslaw. He was always allowed what was called a *private night;* that is, a benefit night, after the fair had closed. There was always on that occasion a highly respectable audience, embracing the city marshals, and, not unfrequently,

some of the aldermen. Flockton's Italian Rope-dancer was an exquisite piece of mechanism. The place where this famous man performed was the George Inn.

Next to Flockton, Jobson acquired some popularity, though in no respect equal to the former; and for what little celebrity he did acquire he was indebted to his wife. He used to perform at the Greyhound Inn. A curious circumstance is connected with the mention of this man. A wild youth, the son of a worthy woman who was pew-opener at the chapel of the celebrated Dr. Fordyce, had absconded from his maternal mansion, and enlisted under the banners of Jobson. His mother, one day passing through Smithfield during fair-time, perceived, to her great surprise, her son, dressed, like Joseph, in a coat of many colours, dancing and figuring away on Jobson's scaffold. Half frantic, she pressed through the crowd, and, running up the stairs of the booth, threw her arms around and embraced him. This extraordinary circumstance attracted the admiration of a large concourse of spectators; and it was with great difficulty that Jobson was persuaded to part with the youth, who afterwards became a useful and valuable member of society. Jobson died not many years since, at a very advanced age, in a provincial workhouse.

The late Philip Astley had at this period a booth fitted up for equestrian performances.

At a subsequent period the late Mr. Richardson was the grand magnet of attraction in the Fair. He had a surprising mode of securing popular favour; and never was there a greater favourite of John Bull. Richardson was a very shrewd fellow; he had some talented ideas of the histrionic art,

he got up his pieces very correctly; and the costume of his dresses was splendid. Richardson was never more happy than when talking of Edmund Kean having been in his employ. His booth in the fair was the grandest the eye could fix upon, and, when illuminated at night with the radiance emanating from a profusion of variegated lamps, was pre-eminently beautiful. Richardson, unlike his predecessor Jobson, took great care of the main chance, and died rich.

Scowton and Gyngell were also famous in their day; and Lane and Ingleby, as legerdemain performers: the latter assumed to himself the pompous title of "Emperor of all the Conjurors."

It has already been mentioned that Astley made his *debût* at Bartholomew Fair. Another equestrian of respectability was Saunders, who annually exhibited his astonishing feats in his wooden amphitheatre to admiring spectators. Unfortunately his performances were more than once interrupted by the unpleasant appearance of the myrmidons of John Doe and Richard Roe.

Smithfield, during the time of Bartholomew Fair, has furnished a fine school for zoological science. The names of Pidcock, Atkins, Polito, and Wombwell, stand high in public estimation. The first and third, although their head quarters were at Exeter Change (now no more), yet deigned to honour Bartholomew Fair with their presence; and in stately caravans, like the animals in Noah's Ark, were to be found antelopes, buffaloes, camels, dromedaries, elephants, and a long catalogue of other quadrupeds, birds, reptiles, &c. Wombwell's collection of animals was by far the most numerous.

In 1783 the celebrated Jeffery Dunstan, so named from having been found on the step of a door at a house in the parish of St. Dunstan's in the West, made his appearance at Bartholomew Fair. He had acquired notoriety by his grotesque figure, and by his always carrying a sack flung over his shoulder and continually bawling out "Old Wigs!" "Tory Rory Gold!" "Old Wigs!" Jeffery was made Mayor of Garrat. Mr. Hall, the collector of stuffed birds and beasts before mentioned, engaged Jeffery to attend his exhibition during the fair; but little crooked Jeff was the greatest part of the time so completely drunk that the Mayor of Garrat got into merited disgrace.

It is naturally to be supposed that the annual fair of the metropolis of the British empire, the first city in the world, must have an immense multitude of visitors, among whom are mingled a number of individuals of the lowest classes of society. Hence formerly many robberies and gross outrages were there committed; but for some few years past the fair has been conducted so orderly, that parties of ladies, without even the protection of a gentleman, may safely promenade it. This is chiefly owing to the arrangements of the City Marshals and the New Police.

There is sitting during the fair a special court of justice, denominated the COURT OF PIE POUDRE; it is held at the *Hand and Shears*, Middle Street, Cloth Fair. This court decides in all cases of assault, battery, riot, &c.; and from its decision there is no appeal.

The practice of street-preaching was attempted in the vicinity of the fair by Boatswain Smith; but this self-confident haranguer met with but an

untoward reception. The royal sage has observed that there is a time for every thing under the sun; but the period of Bartholomew Fair was not a time for preaching the gospel.

Many attempts have been made to put down Bartholomew Fair; but they have all proved abortive, for two reasons especially:—The first is, Bartholomew Fair is too closely connected with the chartered privileges of the City of London: do away with that fair, and numerous other privileges must (to use the legal language) cease and determine. The second reason is, that the Corporation of the City of London greatly benefit by the Fair. The civic funds are far from being superabundant. In former debates in the Court of Common Council it was truly amusing to peruse the speeches of some of the antagonists of Smithfield Fair. Such a precious display of civic logic and mawkish morality even out-heroded Herod!

John Bunyan, in his vivid description of Vanity Fair, in his immortal work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, evidently alludes to Bartholomew Fair.

We shall close with a few remarks on fairs in general. The fanatical idea of the criminality of visiting fairs has no foundation either in reason or in holy scripture. The Divine Founder of the Christian Religion performed his first miracle to aid and promote social pleasure at a marriage feast at Cana, of Galilee; and Dr. Watts has beautifully observed,

> "Religion never was design'd
> "To make our pleasures less."

Public amusements under discreet regulations are indispensable; and, to use the emphatic words of a pious and elegant writer, Miss Talbot, "Amuse-

ments, when properly and proportionably mixed with the more serious purposes of life, become a part of duty. Relaxation is necessary to health; and the most trifling gaieties serve to cherish our good humour and innocent alacrity of heart."

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